

Meet two longstanding SWCD teams

Cottonwood and Faribault staffers reflect on 30 years of changes in the conservation field

Batman and Robin. Mulder and Scully. The Three Musketeers. The three fictionalized justice-seeking, wrongdoing-fighting teams became common household names.

Conservation-minded landowners in Cottonwood and Faribault counties might start a local list of their own.

There, two long-running, erosion-fighting, water-quality-improving teams are known as the go-to conservation resources in their respective soil and water conservation districts.

In the Cottonwood Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) office, District Administrator Kay Clark Gross and Dave Bucklin, a district technician, have worked together for more than 29 years. She joined the SWCD staff in April 1988. He joined the staff in March 1990.

Similarly, in the Faribault SWCD office, for 28 years Program Administrator



Top: Faribault SWCD staff posed for an office photo about 30 years ago with members of the board of supervisors. Staff members included Michele Stindtman (third from left), Shane Johnson (sixth from left), Chad Viland (second from right) and Gary Wehrenberg (far right). **Left:** Cottonwood SWCD and Natural Resources Conservation Service staff posed for an office photo in 1991. They include, left to right, front to back: Judy Markl of NRCS and Kay Clark Gross of the SWCD; Cheryl Mathias of the SWCD, Gary Moreau of NRCS, Tabor Hoek and Dave Bucklin of the SWCD. **Contributed Photos**



Michele Stindtman has worked with Shane Johnson, program technician; and Chad Viland, water resource technician. Stindtman joined the SWCD staff in July 1986; Johnson was hired in April 1990; Viland started in June 1991.

Marking turning points

In conference calls and follow-up emails, Gross,

Bucklin, Stindtman and Viland recalled the early days of their careers when funding was incredibly tight and staff numbers were low.

Budgets barely covered two full-time staff. Since then, water plan funds and partnerships have helped offset some staffing concerns. The Cottonwood SWCD now has six employees and two shared

positions. The Faribault SWCD has five employees and two shared positions.

Cottonwood SWCD celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2005. That year it reached a milestone: 1 million feet of field windbreak planted through SWCD connections. Bucklin himself planted many of those windbreaks.

Faribault SWCD staff recalled several times throughout their careers when commodity prices were high and it seemed as if everyone was tearing down farm sites and removing windbreaks, terraces and other conservation practices to raise crops.

For conservation staff, recalling that happen still stings. These days, interest in conservation practices is once again picking up — particularly for practices related to in-field management and drainage systems.

Pondering changes

At the Cottonwood SWCD, Gross and Bucklin recalled summers when farmers' fieldwork brought a weeks-long lull to the office. Bucklin and Gross joked that they would start looking forward to time at the fair booth because it got them out of the office and talking to landowners.

Today, there never seems to be a lull — especially with the increase in

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— Kay Clark Gross,
Cottonwood SWCD administrator

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administrative duties. The amount of meetings, watershed work, grant management, and record keeping has definitely increased over the years.

Staff from both offices also mentioned changes to technical elements of their work over the past 30 years.

Faribault SWCD staff members talked about how, over the years, technical workloads have shifted between Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and SWCD staff. Cottonwood SWCD staff members recalled the advent of the Technical Service Areas, which grew out of the Non-Point Engineering Assistance Program, established in the 1990s with an appropriation from the Legislature.

Today, eight TSAs exist in Minnesota. TSA staff provide technical assistance to member SWCDs, cooperating with NRCS, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and other local, state and federal units of government.

One thing hasn't changed: board support.

“We always have had a good board. Any time we wanted to try something different, the board has allowed us to branch out,” Gross said.

Looking forward

“We've never seemed to have a big enough checkbook when the opportunity existed,” Stindtman said, adding that she hopes for a future

with budgets that make it possible to fund practices when landowners are interested and have the need.

Cottonwood SWCD's Bucklin and Gross said they hoped that the watershed-based implementation funds would help to offset some of the funding shortfalls and get more projects done.

“For the first time, it feels we will really have money to accomplish things in the water plan,” Gross said.

Kay and Dave. Michele, Shane, and Chad.

Whether coming off of a temporary USDA position (Gross worked nine months for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service [ASCS]), a position at a local co-op (Johnson), a former baker (Bucklin), straight from college (Stindtman), or a one-time CASE-IH employee (Viland), these two long-running teams are proof that you really can make conservation a career.